DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 393 201 EA 027 466

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TITLE Recruiting Volunteers--With a Fair.
INSTITUTION National Association of Elementary School Principals, Alexandria, VA.
REPORT NO ISSN-0735-0031
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 5p.
AVAILABLE FROM Educational Products, NAESP, 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-3483 ($2.50; $2 each for 10 or more).
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
JOURNAL CIT Here's How; v14 n3 Mar 1996

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Fund Raising; *Organizational Effectiveness; *Parent School Relationship; *School Activities; *Volunteers; Volunteer Training
IDENTIFIERS Ohio County Schools WV

ABSTRACT

This news brief describes how the faculty and Parent Teachers' Association at Steenrod Elementary School in Wheeling, West Virginia, organized a volunteer fair to increase parent involvement and retain good volunteers. The fair calls attention to the many ways in which volunteers can help. The planning group first listed the school's most important volunteer needs. They agreed on 14 critical areas and provided booths for each of them at the fair, which was held in the school gymnasium. At the fair, a child psychologist described how familiarity with the school alleviates parents' and children's anxieties. Each volunteer activity was rated as to how much time from volunteers was required. Two questions to consider before utilizing volunteers in a school activity are: (1) Will the proceeds from the fundraiser justify the amount of effort invested by the volunteers? and (2) Will the event foster enthusiasm for the organization, resulting in sustained commitment? School administrators are advised to use volunteers efficiently and to value their investments. (LMI)

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Here's HOW

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

VOLUME 14, NUMBER 3
MARCH 1996

ED 393 201

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Recruiting Volunteers—With a Fair

Rebecca Wilmoth and Kathleen Steber

In this age of busy, working families, how does a school increase parent involvement, while making sure it retains good volunteers? That was the question facing the faculty and PTA at Steenrod Elementary School in Wheeling, West Virginia. The solution? A volunteer fair that would not only draw attention to the many ways that volunteers can help, but also help them understand the necessary commitment of time and talent *before* they sign up for an activity. Informed volunteers tend to stick with their projects.

So a group of teachers, parents, and the principal rolled up our sleeves to plan an evening of fun, information, and friendship for parents of current students and incoming kindergartners. We chose a candy theme—"Be a Sucker for Kids." Our goals were to:

- Continue *and* improve existing volunteer services;
- Inform parents who were previously uninvolved;
- Increase the number of parents involved; and
- Help volunteers understand the nature and extent of the commitment they are asked to make.

Rebecca Wilmoth is a parent volunteer and Kathleen Steber is the principal at Steenrod Elementary School in Wheeling, West Virginia.

Areas of Need

The planning group's first task was to list the school's most important volunteer needs. We agreed on 14 critical areas and provided booths for each of them at the fair.

- **Reading Tutors** are parents who work on a one-to-one basis with students who need extra help with vocabulary, oral reading, and comprehension.
- **School Spirit** committee members are teachers and parents who plan schoolwide events to foster a feeling of family fun, such as "Wear a Hat Day" and the "Steenrod Standout," a display case which each week features the hobbies, interests, and family of a child from each grade.
- **Dads on Duty** are fathers who can help with carpentry skills for school plays and stage productions.
- **Before- and After-School Care** committee members help plan and evaluate the before- and after-school care program for children of working parents. Activities may include help with homework, playing board games, being read to, and learning new crafts.
- The **Book Fair** committee provides reasonably priced, appropriate books for sale during American Education Week. Parents provide one-on-one help to the young book shoppers.
- The **Company/School Fund-Raising** committee works with businesses such as local department stores or Campbell's Soup Company which provide schools with premiums for buying their

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products. The committee collects labels from soup cans throughout the year, exchanging them for school equipment.

• **Cultural Arts** committee members oversee the local arts contest sponsored each year by the National PTA. Each child submits a work of art, photograph, music performance, composition, or creative writing, and the committee selects judges from local high schools, colleges, and art institutes.

• **Homeroom Parents** work with teachers to plan celebrations such as the Fall Festival or Valentine's Day party. They design party favors, food, and games for each event.

• **Ways and Means** members oversee the money-making projects needed to buy special equipment or sponsor field trips. For example, we recently moved into a new building, closing two smaller schools. Because glassmaking is an important part of the area's industrial heritage, the committee commissioned and sold cut-glass Christmas ornaments containing pictures of the old schools.

• **Banking** committee members act as bank tellers for a schoolwide student savings program, in partnership with a local bank. Each Wednesday, students are allowed to go to the school "bank" to make deposits. Bank statements are mailed to children's homes each quarter.

• The **Citizenship** committee provides varied activities promoting good citizenship and a love of history. Last year, our focus was on birthdays of famous people and inventions, and how they have changed our world. "Elvis," "Florence Nightingale," and "Mary Todd Lincoln" visited each class on their respective birthdays. Teachers and children alike devoured six-foot submarines on the birthday of the sandwich.

• **Clothes Closet** members gather clothes from school families and dispense them to needy children through a central county location. Children are given vouchers for an appropriate number of clothing items. The committee also collects new mittens and underwear as Christmas gifts.

• **Santa's Secret Shop** members sell and wrap reasonably priced holiday gifts to students in a store-like atmosphere.

• The **Programs** committee arranges for interesting guest speakers, and works with the Citizenship committee on a calendar of events. For example, during Valentine season, a local cardiologist told children how to care for their hearts, and during Fire Prevention Week, local firefighters brought a portable "house" that filled with smoke so children could practice lifesaving exit techniques.

Come to the Fair!

One of the most important purposes of the Volunteer Fair was to welcome new kindergarten parents. Several weeks beforehand, we set up an information table at the kindergarten screening—the parents' first contact with our school. PTA volunteers greeted families and gave them invitations to the fair and suckers for the kids. Current school families were invited by a sucker-shaped flyer sent home with the children and an announcement in the school's newsletter.

On the evening of the fair, the gym was decorated with a huge "Be a Sucker for Kids" banner in green, red, yellow, and blue. On the walls were large suckers—12-inch styrofoam circles covered with bright cellophane and mounted on 3-foot dowels.

The center of the room held rows of chairs marked with large bunches of balloons, with the 14 booths lining the edges of the gym. Volunteers at each booth wore colored felt smocks and sucker-shaped name tags. The Homeroom Parents displayed mock party favors and treat bags for each holiday. The Cultural Arts committee featured student entries, awards, and rules for the annual art contest. The Citizenship committee displayed a scrapbook of its yearly activities.

The Company/School Fund-Raising booth was festooned with cans of food bearing labels to exchange for school equipment, as well as some of the premiums received. Reading Tutors displayed the books and teaching tools tutors use, as well as a calendar of tutoring time blocks, and a summary of the training program for tutors. The Clothes Closet committee showed the types of clothing most needed by the area's children.

Fair Activities

A child psychologist kicked off the Fair by talking about how familiarity with the school and teachers can alleviate feelings of anxiety for newly enrolled children and their parents. Past volunteers were honored, and an emcee described each booth and its needs. Volunteer activity in each was rated as to how much time it required—a little, a lot, only during school hours, only on weekends, etc. Suckers were taped under a few chairs for door prizes—free PTA memberships for a year.

At the booths, parents could

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PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY

This article is in support of the following standard from *Proficiencies for Principals, Revised* (NAESP 1991):

Organizational Management. The principal must attract volunteers and provide them effective training and meaningful assignments.

Don't Overuse Your Volunteers

Before you know it, it will be time for the next fund-raiser and the same old questions: What do we do this time? Sell cookies? Wrapping paper? Candy? Popcorn? Pancakes? How about a car wash? Who will do it? Will people be in line waiting to volunteer? Or will the same core group have to pick up the slack?

Before tackling those questions, however, let's ask some new ones.

1. Will the proceeds from your fund-raiser justify the amount of effort invested by your volunteers?

2. Will the event foster enthusiasm for your organization? Or will the volunteers be taken for granted and not used efficiently? Will the fund-raiser have a hidden cost: fewer volunteers for the next one?

Organizations today need more than funds to be successful. Active participation by people who are interested and motivated is also critical. Are your fund-raising efforts turning people on? Or off?

Time Is Money

Look at the cash return you are getting for volunteers' efforts. Take a pancake breakfast. The gross proceeds might be $2400 in tickets sold to 800 people. But after you deduct the cost of pancake batter, syrup, juice, sausage, milk, coffee, promotional expenses, hall rental, and other charges, you might net only $300.

To make that $300, you need a lot of volunteers to service and clean up after 800 people. You could easily have 50 people spend an average of 10 hours each on such an event, including organizational meetings, set-up, food preparation, table servicing, promotion, ticket sales, etc.

If you spread that $300 among 500 hours, that's a net return of 60 cents per volunteer hour. If you had people waiting in line to volunteer, and looking forward to working on the next fund-raiser—no problem. But if you need to look for volunteers, and prod people to participate, you're lucky to have enough. In fact, some people might prefer to donate $1.80 instead of spending three hours at a pancake breakfast on a Saturday morning.

The Hidden Cost

Years ago, at a meeting of a volunteer organization, I did a reality check. We had about 50 members, but only the same group of five or six peoplecame to the monthly meeting. On this occasion, our chairman was her usual upbeat, enthusiastic self—until themeeting started. As she hit the first item on the agenda—the annual fund-raiser—she looked out at the four of us and started speaking as though we were 400: "You've really got to get involved...got to volunteer...got to show some commitment...got to show your interest...."

She was obviously upset that no one had volunteered to head the fund-raiser. But each of us already chaired one committee and worked on others. She was sending the wrong message to the wrong people.

While this may seem trivial, little things like this add up and can have an adverse effect. Our overworked finance chairman had a bad day at the office. She didn't need to hear any misdirected whining. She resigned the next day.

Things like this happen because a lot of us aren't paying real attention to what we say, how we plan, and how we use our volunteer time. That is when volunteers start asking themselves, "Why am I here? Why am I wasting my time?" And you begin to incur a hidden cost. You may lose that volunteer's time the next time you need it for something.

Before you call for volunteers, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do you overuse the same people?
2. Do your volunteers know exactly what you are asking of them? Or have you just filled committees with warm bodies who waste time standing around because they are unclear about the task at hand? Do your committees have clear objectives and specific responsibilities?
3. Do committee tasks sometimes grow into open-ended commitments—or expectations?
4. Are your meetings productive and time-efficient? Or are they interrupted by socializing, nonrelevant topics, or endless discussion of minor details?
5. Do tasks overlap so that some volunteers feel unnecessary?
6. Is there a real purpose to each task? Don't have a volunteer gather and compile data on community demographics for the membership committee if there is no plan or money available to actually use the data.

Volunteers are the lifeblood of an organization, but they are usually people with full lives and many demands on their time. Don't take them and their time for granted.

James Rosenwinkel
Wheaton, Illinois
(Mr. Rosenwinkel is a former member of a private school's board of education.)

also view photos of children enjoying various volunteer projects. Each photo had two captions—a detailed paragraph for adult readers, and a large easy-reader version for the children. Refreshments consisted of "sucker punch" and a cake trimmed in real suckers and decorated with the fair's theme, "Be a Sucker for Kids." Plates, cups, and napkins were all in bright sucker colors. Before the evening concluded, ideas for next year's fair were already clicking in place. Someone suggested that school activities be recorded on videotape during the year and shown at the fair. We decided to recycle the same colors and props next year, with the new theme, "Be a Life-Saver—Volunteer."

The evening netted 39 new parents to join the more than 150 reliable volunteers the school has called on in the past to serve our students.

Here's How (ISSN 075-0031) is published four times during the school year by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Louanne Wheeler, editor. Single copies: $2.50; bulk orders (10 or more): $2.00 each. Virginia residents add 4.5% sales tax. Specify date and title of issue when ordering. Checks payable to NAESP must accompany order. Send to Educational Products, NAESP, 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314-3483.

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